

A creaking floorboard woke me in the early hours of the predawn gloom. Lord Tamishi, his demure but self-confident wife Jilu and their three young children's deep breathing were the only sounds I could hear for a moment. Then another shift in the wind brought an unfamiliar odor through the open window.

Thumbing the hilt of my prized katana, an unheard of gift for a simple servant like myself, I steadied my beating heart and extended my senses out as far as they would go. Thirty-four summers I'd spent in my masters' home and after the first five years of my life, those years had been heaven on earth. Being the illegitimate bastard child to a common whore after all was no way to spend a life, let alone a childhood. Still, when my father had sent for me on my fifth birthday, I was terrified.

Change is something I never did deal with effectively. I beat my head against it like a bear trying to get that last little bit of honey out of a tree. When I arrived, I was a half-starved and so quiet he often had to check to see if I was still breathing in my sleep. Thirty years of care and attention at my masters' hands had changed me irreversibly. Of course I was extremely loyal, but more than that, I was trusted to come and go at my leisure and was the only servant who could address my master and his wife by their proper names.

The katana I slept with was another example of the trust my master held for me. Only warriors and chiefs could carry the noble weapon, and I was neither. He'd made the argument that because I protected his family I was a warrior. It isn't my place to disagree with Lord Tamishi, but I silently scoffed at the idea. Still, it was an honor and I'd been encouraged to train with the samurai.

Another creak broke me from my introspection and I hesitated for only the briefest moment before jumping up, pulling my blade free and jabbing upwards into the rafters above my mattress. Several drops of blood fell on my face as a grunt and sigh were followed quickly by a dark shape tumbling from above me.

The would-be assassin landed hard on his back and his breath exploded from his lungs as he hit the floor at my feet. I flipped my sword in my hand and drove the point downwards into the man's chest with both hands. His scream alerted the household that something was afoot.

I ran towards my masters' room, leaped thru the delicate rice paper and wood doorway and rolling to a stop at the foot of his bed. I kicked the dark figure looming over his bed, striking the assassin in the groin and causing him to double over as he shouted out in pain. The blade of my sword quickly pierced his chin and traveled up through his head, silencing him.

Tearing paper and battle shouts drew my attention and I ripped my blade free as I spun around, still kneeling in front of my masters' bed. Three more dark figures burst into the room, each pulling a blade free of a scabbard as they closed in on me. One on one, I would probably stand a chance and maybe if I could surprise one, I would be able to take two. Three was more than I would likely be able to handle and I still had no idea if Tamishi and Jilu were still alive.

I feigned forward, drawing one of the attackers in as he tried to decapitate me. I ducked under the slash and kicked him backwards through the torn doorway. Another stepped forward and kicked me in the stomach, driving my breath out of me as I stumbled backwards into Jilu's sewing desk. I sensed a blade slicing through the air and rolled off the left as a sword crashed through her table, sending needles cascading all over the floor.

I lashed out with my sword, a desperate move on my part, and luckily struck flesh. Twisting my sword savagely, hoping to inflict further damage, I leaped back to my feet. The last assassin had stayed back, waiting for an opening I assume, and was on me quickly the moment I'd regained my feet.

He thrust his sword forward and I barely had time to parry and move to the left, clearing myself from the destroyed desk. An overhead slash followed and I felt the blow all the way up my shoulders as I blocked the strike with both hands. My mind overcame the shock of the attack and I settled in for a prolonged fight with this assassin. I readied myself as I'd been taught and held my sword with both hands in front of me at the ready position.

When the assassin moved in I found myself thinking with a detached sense of awe at how fast he was. He slashed down at my right shoulder and when I raised my blade to defend he slammed the palm of his hand into my chest. Fresh hot pain shot up my chest and prickled up the back of my neck. Without looking down I knew he'd used the spikes meant to aid his scaling a smooth wall to pierce four small shallow holes in my chest.

He was probably hoping that the wound would slow me down, or sap my will to fight. His next strike was a quick thrust towards my stomach. Rather than parry his blade, I sidestepped his thrust and let his own momentum carry him off balance. I caught him with my right arm and grabbed a hold of his gui. I pulled him upwards and back and slammed him into the floor. The breath was driven from his lungs as he hit the floor, followed quickly by a grunt and sigh as he died instantly.

Confused, I rolled back into a sitting position and rested my body back on the palms of my hands. My sword had clattered off the left when I'd slammed my opponent to the floor, so I prepared myself for death as another figure loomed over me.

The lamp near the window was ignited and the room was quickly filled with the dim orange glow of a low burning flame. The figure looming over me was Tamishi, who smiled as he held out his arm for me to grasp.

"What have I told you about your sword?" He asked in mock anger as he helped me to my feet.

I sighed theatrically to the amusement of Jilu as she handed me back my katana, handle first. "Make it part of yourself." I groaned, taking the sword gingerly from my masters' wife.

"I don't see any other body parts lying around here." He said while looking at me hard in the eyes, though the muscles twitching at his cheeks betrayed his joke.

"Yes, well. That certainly was not for a lack of trying." I said with a proud smile.

"You did well." Tamishi said as his eyes momentarily filled with tears. He quickly blinked away and bowed. "Thank you."